



Of course they thought he was crazy, rebuilding that ruined old church. His father was furious about it. He thought his son had lost it. Even the priest assigned to look after the worn out old place didn't know what to make of this carousing, privileged brat offering him money, talking about fixing up the place. Yet he was persistent, even if a little strange, this young man named Francis. As his biographer, Thomas, recorded, he had seen a vision—Jesus had spoken to him through the painted cross in the church: “Francis...repair my house,” Christ said miraculously to him.¹ And so he was called, on a mission. There was a divine reason behind it all—behind his stubborn holiness, rebuilding that old church.

But Saint Francis was no different than other holy and wholly stubborn men and women, impassioned and driven by faith and vision—Abraham, father and pilgrim; David, that dancing dreamer and king, and Solomon, that builder of the Temple. Given jobs to do by God himself, they were obedient and maddeningly focused on what God wanted them to do. It is a recurring theme, holy persistence. And what motivated these holy and strong ancestors of ours wasn't merely miraculous vision or nationalistic spirit, but something else—something deeper and divine—some personal command from some higher authority, a power that made them powerful, determined to do what they were called to do no matter the challenges, no matter the obstacles. But what was it?

In today's gospel we hear Jesus say, “let not your hearts be troubled,” and we may imagine that Jesus said these words in the gentlest tone, full of warm and comforting sentiment. But that's actually not the case. The context is dark and dangerous. Judas had just left their company to do what he was going to, and the disciples were clueless and fearful. And Jesus doesn't coddle the disciples here. The mood is explicitly blunt and imperative. “Do not be afraid!” he says. “Believe! I'm coming back!”² And Jesus means what he says. He's a man of his word because he is the Son of the Father—because, as he said so divinely and so scandalously, “I am in the Father and the Father is in me.”³ This is what Philip was so slow to understand. “Be not afraid!” That's a commandment, not a suggestion. And it's a command given by the Lord and Master of all things, a command given by the Christ who made the darkest darkness bright with sacrifice and resurrection—the Christ that can make your darkness bright, no matter how dark your world has become. Let not your hearts be troubled. Our God is strong, and you'd better believe it.

Now what does this mean for us? In Saint Francis' day, rebuilding that rundown old church was a sign of what Francis and his brothers would do for the whole Church—renewing her spirit in the spirit of simplicity and powerful preaching, revitalizing a Church and a society weighed down by a feudal and cultural lethargy. Pope Innocent III (the pope in Francis' day) saw Saint Francis in his dreams, holding up the crumbling edifice of the Lateran basilica—“Francis...repair my house”—his mission was greater than rebuilding one little church.⁴

So for us, what is the message? What is the point? It is possible, without giving in too much to a gloomy point of view, to suggest that our society in some ways has grown darker, more hostile, more violent, less understanding and compassionate. Things relating to faith, ideas or ethical convictions, are subject to ridicule in a manner noticeably more caustic than in the past. “Our

¹ Thomas of Celano, *The Second Life of Saint Francis* 10

² John 14:1-3

³ John 14:10

⁴ *The Second Life of Saint Francis* 17

enemy is nothing other than faith itself,” Sam Harris, that atheist crusader, wrote confidently.⁵ We are in a new and not altogether wholesome age. MacIntyre, the great philosopher, said some years ago we’re in a “new dark ages,” and that “part of our predicament” is that so many of us have yet to realize it.⁶ We just grunt along—cowardly, blindly.

But Jesus still says, “let not your hearts be troubled.” He still commands us to believe and to be not afraid. He said this to the disciples in the darkness, and he says the same to us. And so for those of us who really believe, this is an exhilarating age. It’s part of my story, coming into the Catholic Church, the many details of which I don’t have time to share nor would you be interested. But I can tell you of one moment, years ago now, when I was working with several other Anglican ministers and the then Catholic bishop of Fort Worth. We were trying to get as many of our people to come home to the Catholic Church as possible, and we were working discreetly with the local Catholic bishop and the Vatican at the time. And once, at our meeting with the bishop (he’d just got off the phone with Rome, with the Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, who himself had just come from a meeting with Pope Benedict); he told us that Benedict, when reviewing our particular situation, made the comment to the Prefect, “The Spirit is blowing uniquely in the state of Texas.” A throw-away comment perhaps, about us—about you and me—“The Spirit is blowing uniquely in the state of Texas.” But why would the Pope ever say that? What did he mean? It gives me goose bumps to think of it still. What is it that is going on, what work of the Lord in our midst?

And so here, at Saint Rita, what are we doing? We’re building—just like Saint Francis and so many bold believers like him. Some think the age of faith is over. There are even some Catholics worn and worried by the harassing powers our present culture. But what are we doing? We’re building. What does faith and hope look like in a world like ours? It looks like what so many of us are doing—working, giving, praying—fearlessly. Think about what all this messy construction means spiritually. It’s more than a mere testament to our resources. It’s more a testament to our belief and our hope in the Lord who says, “Don’t be afraid.” It’s amazing when you stop to think about it.

And so what’s your job? Well, it’s this: Do your part. Don’t be a bump on a log, but instead hear what Jesus is saying to us—what he’s always said to his disciples in every age: “Get up, go to work in my name. Laugh at doomsayers. Providence is at your back. I’m the Lord, and you need to always remember that.” Friends, these are interesting times, but we’re building—it’s messy, but it’s hope. So don’t waste time nursing fear and resentment, but get to work like a faithful follower of Jesus. And never ever forget to stand downwind of the Spirit, for the Spirit is blowing uniquely through us.

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⁵ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, 131

⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 263